A film, some concerts, a tour…
DAFT PUNK: THE RETURN

by Benoît Sabatier
Translated by one-additional-time

After having created a stir in Cannes by presenting their ultra-secret film *Electroma*, Daft Punk went on tour this summer. The opportunity came in the form of a question: after having revolutionized music at 20 years old, how do they remain geniuses at 30?

Lest we forget. 1995: yesterday, and prehistory. After a reign of 2 terms, the socialists were kicked out by Jacques Chirac, while Daft Punk changed the face of the music world. Their hit Da Funk: a burning, generational musical. Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo had just turned 20. Thanks to them, house music gained international recognition and the youth found a new reason to rave.

Behind the duo, an army rises. French artists, grouped under the label French touch, are acclaimed around the world. In low spirits since the end of disco music, clubs find creativity and vitality again. And Daft Punk puts out fantastic records, which sell millions of copies, while Thomas & Guy-Manuel, opposite from the madness of others, refuse to show their faces in the media. Prodigies, geniuses -- class.

2006: Jacques Chirac, 73, is at the end of his roll, with an abyssal record, and the music world has suffered a severe regression. Bénabar is the peacock at the top of the charts, rock has made its twentieth comeback, house music no longer produces anything exciting. It is in good taste to cheerfully shit on French Touch while the majority of its soldiers have disappeared, meanwhile cafe owners are especially interested in electronica.

Fortunately, Daft Punk are still around. They are in their thirties. They continue on the path of integrity and artistic research. They produced a film, *Electroma*, which was presented in Cannes. They went on tour, coming from a show in California, going to Eurockeennes in Belfort, then Spain, Japan… Thomas Bangalter says: "We cling to our own demands."

When you were starting to make music, were you already thinking that one day you would make a film?
Yes, even before music. When we met, in the late 80s, as teens, we were going to the cinema, to Saint-Michel, to the Accatone, to the Actions. We saw experimental things, like Warhol films and Hollywood noir films, all the classics, older or recent: Kubrick, Hitchcock, Peter Sellers… We also watched plenty of videos and horror movies.

Did Warhol's films leave an impression on you?
Yes, to see *Flesh* and *Trash*, at 13 years old, what an impression! We knew we had witnessed something subversive, so we were inspired to develop a form of

subversiveness.

Was there a film that fascinated you the most?
Phantom of the Paradise. An unconscious but indelible influence. The hero wears a leather suit, with a sort of chrome mask. I'm a fan of the music, by Paul Williams. His soundtrack for *Bugsy Malone* is also sublime. He tried to create a Broadway version of Phantom of the Paradise, without success. He continues to do concerts in the US; he played the other day in Santa Monica. He doesn't have the same hair anymore, now it's a crew-cut! He's working on a musical, *Happy Days*.

How did you start with your film, *Electroma*?
There was no screenplay, just a treatment, about five pages, inspired by surrealism. There's no dialogue, and it's almost a film without actors. In general, when you write a film, you start with the treatment, and you fulfill it. We wanted to do the opposite. To remove as much as possible, to work from nothing. Shooting it was not conventional, either. [The shoot] lasted eleven days without a real storyboard, but with a shooting script, a precise work plan.

There is a constant in the Daft Punk aesthetic, very far removed from French soil…
Filming took place in California. It was important for the environment. One hour from Los Angeles you find all these varied landscapes; it is very convenient; everything is at your disposal. One hour from Paris, not so much.

Your musical and cinematic references are English-speaking, you live in Los Angeles… Do you have a problem with France?
No. Our favorite director is Buñuel. His movies filmed in France, like *le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*, are masterpieces. I also really like Truffaut… Now, if we had filmed in Auvergne, or in Poitou, this would not have been the same film.

The heroes, two robots, unable to become human beings, commit suicide. We did not necessarily expect such a dark story from Daft Punk…
But if they commit suicide, there might be a hope, in a story of science-fiction: it might mean that they are going to be successful and become human. This is the paradox of suicide, an act that defines humanity.

How could one of the most famous bands on the planet keep this project a secret for over a year?
Well, it's just an experimental art film. The budget rose to 1.2 million euros. We paid out of pocket. It was not a premeditated investment, it was a real expense. Making this film was: why procrastinate what we want to do now? Which was: to make cinema and music a continuity.

You returned to music, you went on tour and played at the Coachella festival near Los Angeles. How was that?
It was great. It had been nine years since we had done a show! We were both

dressed as robots, in a pyramid of light. It felt supercharged being back up on stage in front of 40,000 people…

Did it change the rather cold reception that you received last year for your latest album, *Human After All*?
We were not there for the release. We refused any promotion. Out of integrity. It would have been obscene considering what it represented: spontaneity, a darker, almost totalitarian album. To come out and say: "Buy our record, please"-- no, it would have been impossible. We cling to our own demands.

Despite this demand, there is a problem: Your latest album has not changed the world. The first one did.
Well, changing the music world once already is not bad, right? It was important to make *Human After All* differently, with two guitars and a drum machine. Even if we realized this was not necessarily the music we wanted to listen to, it was just the music we needed to make at that time.

What are the records you want to listen to?
At the moment, nothing. I can stay at home without music. This is the case: I came back to Paris, I moved in, I haven't yet made connections. We are mostly motivated by creation. To make, at the most basic level, things that have never been made. That is what makes us want to move forward.

There was an impression with your last album that you moved forward less, that you returned to the first album…
Our three albums were made with completely different methods. Things had changed enormously between 1995 and 2005, both in the way we listened to music and in the way we made it. *Discovery*, in 2001, had been extremely fine-tuned. *Human After All* goes against that. Ten songs in ten days. No tricks, no safety net. Just truth and vulnerability.

Music is now very regressive, with the return of rock, New Chanson…
We are not passionate about new music. The good house tracks are the old ones from Chicago.

You remixed Franz Ferdinand and, three years ago, you told me you mostly listen to the White Stripes…
Well, yeah. We definitely listen to more rock than house, now. I would say three times more.

Will the next Daft Punk album be a rock album?
But there were already guitars in Human After All, not a synthesizer! It was creating sounds, even the more electronic ones, with a guitar. Rock groups make most of their records with computers.

What's left of the French Touch for you?

Great memories. We can say there was a "summer of love" in France. It was a time when there was an invisibility, the whole world very "up", an anti-gloom, a very strong creative imitation.

But you know, now the term "French Touch" inspires giggles, especially from New Chanson artists…
Oh yeah? In California French Touch isn't dead… Bénabar, Delerm, they have the right to say what they want. That doesn't bother me; we don't listen to them. At times we have lived in abstraction, on our own, in anonymity, and now, we have realized that our music truly, deeply matters.

Is anonymity still important?
It's essential.

From a physical point of view, you're protected. Is it scary being thirty?
Not at all. We have been far from idle and we are full of ideas. Family life is compatible with our projects, with traveling. A child is not a hindrance to our work.

Is being Daft Punk today total freedom, or like dragging the ball and chain?
It's a great freedom. This has been mistaken for arrogance, doing exactly what we want, but it is our integrity, our way of respecting our audience. Not putting ourselves in a box, not seeking to secure our status. Taking risks excites us.

Do you hope to change the musical landscape again?
But we never calculated a plan to change the face of the world! Homework was a surprise, an accident. It was not necessarily such new music, we were accused of perverting house music. In 1995, Da Funk was abuzz, hyped in Parisian circles. We're pleased to have moved past trendiness. To have moved from ephemeral to longevity.

Daft Punk has never worked with other artists. Yet proposals must fall through?
We have tried to. George Michael? It was a question. But a collaboration has to be completely suited for us. There is no question that we would not work on a production that doesn't 100% satisfy us. Otherwise, we are open. Working with Bénabar? Uh… if we found a record that artistically delights us, why not?

Captions:

TWO ROBOTS IN CALIFORNIA
The heroes of the film *Electroma*? Two robots played by Californian actors. "We did everything, from production to funding. But acting? No, of course not!"

THE LIFE OF DAFT PUNK
1974-75: Births of Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter,

respectively.
1994: Released their first song under the name Darlin'.
1997: Daft Punk's first album: *Homework* with the bomb "Da Funk".
2001: Their second album, *Discovery*.
2003: Release of *Interstella 5555*, an animated film that united songs from the album *Discovery*.
2005: Their third album, *Human After All*.
2006: The film *Electroma* and a world tour.

MASKED HEROES
On stage in front of 40,000 people or on film, there is one constant: Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo time and again refuse to to reveal their faces. "Our anonymity is essential," they say.